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or, Frank Reade, Jr., in Search of a
Missing Man.

By "NONAME."

In the Gran Chaco:



"This, no doubt, was the work of Black Juan," said Delmont, in a steely voice. "He is a scoundrel." "Pardon, senor! Do you refer to Juan Martinez?" Astounded, Frank and Delmont turned. There before them, with mocking smile and arms folded across his chest, stood Black Juan.

Every object, no matter how small, came in for a special and careful scrutiny.

"Bejabers, I can't see the sense av a man wid a million av money 'n' a fine home in Ameriky commin' down here in this Godforsaken country," cried Barney. "I've seen nothin' loiko a shamrock since I've been here."

"Golly! yo' ain' got no sense," sniffed Pomp. "Don' yo' know dat man was insane."

"Be me sowl, that's more to his discredit," cried the Celt. "Shure, it shows his bad taste in goin' crazy."

"Yo' may go crazy yo'sef some day," jeered Pomp. "Yo' ain' on de dead level, anyway."

"Whurrroo!" cried Barney, flourishing his arms. "Yez don't want to insult me, do ye?"

"Yo' am insulted drellul easy, 'pears to me," retorted Pomp.

By this time the Celt was boiling.

"Begorra, I'd break the head av yez fer less than that," he roared.

"Keep yo' hat on, chile," said Pomp, nonchalantly. "Don' do nuslin' brash. Yo' might be sorry."

Barney was all ready for a ruction, but at this moment Frank appeared on deck and this put an end to the affair for the time.

He had been in the pilot house, and had left the wheel in care of the detective, Delmont.

"Barney," said Frank, sharply, "just go in and relieve Mr. Delmont. Keep the machine east by north."

"All roight, sor!"

Barney made a grimace at Pomp who returned it. Then he turned a flip-flop and sprang into the pilot house.

Delmont gave up the wheel and went quickly out on deck. He beckoned to Frank.

"Look yonder," he said, in a voice of suppressed excitement, and pointing to the horizon. "What does that low lie against the sky mean?"

Surprised, Frank took the glass and studied the horizon.

Then he gave a sharp cry.

"Fire!" he exclaimed.

"Do you believe it?"

"Look for yourself."

There was no doubt of it. A line of fire was creeping up from the horizon and every moment the black cloud of smoke was rising higher.

Fire in the pampas is a frightful thing to face.

The tall dry grasses beneath the fiery heat of the sun often become ignited, and then a surface sometimes hundreds of miles square is burned over in an incredibly short space of time.

Driven by the winds the flames often run at tremendous speed. The fastest horse oftentimes is overtaken.

All this was known to Frank Reade, Jr., and it may be understood that he watched the line of flames with the most intense of interest.

He saw that the wind was in the southeast quarter and that the course of the Flash should be changed more to the west in order to avoid being overtaken.

A troubled light shone in his eyes. He could see that the situation was one of great peril.

"Barney," he said, imperatively, "I think you had better change the course of the Flash to the westward. Put on all speed."

"I will, sor."

A moment later the machine was bounding away over the plain at a terrific pace on the new course. The explorers stood on deck watching the flames.

Higher and higher they ran in the sky, rapidly nearing the zenith. It was plain that they were gaining.

"Do you suppose that the fire was set by human hands?" asked the detective.

Frank was thoughtful.

"It may be so," he replied. "But if so, it is strange that none of them have been seen. I could hardly understand the motive, though."

"Nor I!" agreed Delmont. "We will keep an eye out for the sequel. Hello! What is that?"

The detective's eyes kindled and he pointed with one long finger to the west.

CHAPTER III.

AT THE LAKE.

THAT which had claimed Delmont's attention was the means of arousing sudden hope in the minds of the adventurers.

Far in the distance there was seen that which looked like a bar of gleaming silver.

It shone with rare and beautifull effulgence against the green of the plain. For some moments the adventurers watched it, and then Barney cried:

"Begorra, it is water!"

"Water!" exclaimed Delmont.

"That is just what it is," declared Frank. "It is a lake, or at all events a wide river."

"A river?" exclaimed Delmont. "It cannot be the Rio de la Plata."

"No," agreed Frank; "nor do I think it is a river at all."

"A lake?" suggested Delmont.

"Just it," said Frank. "At any rate, it offers us an avenue of escape from the flames."

Every moment now the big lake drew nearer. It expanded into an enormous body of water, in fact a sort of inland sea.

Frank drew a pocket chart from his pocket and consulted it.

"There is no such body of water mentioned here," he declared. "I wonder what it means? It seems like a sizable lake too."

"Indeed it is," agreed Delmont, "but you know that the Gran Chaco is a region seldom visited by surveyors."

"That is true!"

The fire had gained rapidly on the Flash. The long grasses materially retarded the progress of the machine.

But the distance to the lake was now not very great, and the safety of the party was assured.

Soon the sandy beach was reached and the glimmering expanse lay stretched before them. The opposite shore could not be seen.

Frank ran the Flash unhesitatingly into the water. The machine had been constructed especially for the crossing of rivers and even small lakes where the water was smooth. The body of the Flash was shaped like a boat, and the wheels could be easily equipped with paddles.

Out into the lake for a few hundred yards the Flash was paddled, therefore. This was far enough to be safe from the deadly heat of the ravenous flames.

Across the wide expanse the flames swept. Nearer they drew to the lake shore.

The great volume of smoke like a towering mountain swept down over the lake surface and enveloped the Flash. But in a short while the line of fire broke its strength upon the sands, and then the air cleared.

A mighty blackened expanse was seen to extend far to the east and south. It gave a different aspect to the country.

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed Delmont. "It made a clean sweep, didn't it! What a spectacle."

"A fire on the pampas is no light matter," declared Frank. "Doubtless, many living creatures perished in it. Ah, what is that?"

The young inventor sprung up with a sharp cry.

His surprise was well warranted. Delmont saw what had caused it.

Far up the lake shore, so far, in fact, that they were hardly to be identified, were a number of mounted men.

There was no denying the fact. They were human beings on horses, and they were riding to the west along the lake shore.

"Herders!" exclaimed Delmont. "They were driven here by the fire just as we were!"

"Don't be too sure," said Frank. "They may be brigands!"

"Humph!" exclaimed the detective. "In any event we ought to cultivate their acquaintance."

"You are right, and that is what we will endeavor to do!"

With this the young inventor started the Flash toward the shore. Nearer the machine drew and then ran out upon the sand.

But all this had taken time, and when the Flash had begun her pursuit the unknown horsemen had disappeared beyond a small belt of timber which fringed the lake shore.

Frank took the Flash out upon the plain, as she could run faster there. Then he bore down for the clump of beech trees.

Swiftly the machine ran and in due course had reached the timber. But not a sign of the horsemen could be seen.

They had disappeared as completely as if swallowed up by the earth. In vain the adventurers made search for them.

Beyond the timber there was only the open expanse of the pampas.

The speed of their horses could not have carried them out of view in that direction in this short space of time. The grove of beeches did not hold them.

Where then had they vanished to? This was a conundrum.

After a long search the explorers were bound to admit that their quest was baffled. They were puzzled and surprised.

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"And yet they must be about here somewhere," declared Delmont positively.

"Unless we have been deceived by a chimera or an optical illusion," said Frank. "Such things are known!"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed the detective. "You may depend upon it that it was nothing of the kind. Those rascals are in hiding somewhere about here."

"Well, where?"

"I can't say. But there must be a cavern or some retreat."

Then Barney let out a yell to wake the dead.

"Whurrroo!" he roared. "Wud yez lok at the omadhomis out yonder?"

All eyes were turned in the direction indicated. An astonishing spectacle was beheld.

Seemingly from the very surface of the plain the score of horsemen had suddenly risen to view. Certainly they had not been visible in that spot a minute since.

It was a most astonishing sight. The explorers could not doubt their eyesight now.

There they were, strapping big fellows in their pampas costume of slashed velvet trousers, broad silken sash and navy jacket with the customary broad sombrero.

Typical gaucheros they were, armed to the teeth and besizing small but fleet pampas ponies.

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They reined their horses in and immediately circled out in the form of a crescent. Their excited voices and Spanish oaths could be plainly heard.

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They were not long in coming.

The Spanish outlaws began to circle their restive horses about the machine. Then one of them rode forward with uplifted hand.

Frank had been waiting for this. He stepped out on the deck and answered the signal.

Then the parley began.

Frank understood Spanish and had no trouble in talking with the outlaw spokesman.

"Buenos, señor?" said the outlaw, politely. "May I ask where you are from?"

"We are Americans," replied Frank, with a return of politeness. "We are traveling in Argentina for love of adventure. I am Frank Reade, Jr., of the United States. I beg the honor of your name?"

The outlaw's lip curled, and his dark eyes twinkled.

"I can hardly expect you to know me, señors," he said, "as you are new-comers in the Gran Chaco. Ask any gauchero, or Gringo, and he will tell you of Black Juan."

The fellow removed his hat as he spoke, and bowed to the saddle point with much courtesy. Frank returned the salute with equal effusion.

"I am honored, noble señor," he replied, "and will say that you may ask of any American of Frank Reade, Jr., and they will tell you of his power to destroy armies, to level kingdoms."

Black Juan reined his horse back, and seemed a bit startled. But only for a moment. Incredulity shone in his dark face.

"Well spoken, Señor Americano," he said. "Now will you tell me how you manage to propel the wheeled wagon without horses?"

"It is done with the aid of electric dynamos," replied Frank.

The outlaw looked blank.

It was plain that he knew nothing of electricity. Frank knew that it was idle to attempt an explanation.

After a moment the outlaw chief reined his horse nearer and said:

"Do you carry much gold aboard your wagon, señor? This is a bad country, and there are desperate robbers to be met in the Gran Chaco."

"I have no fear," replied Frank, pointedly. "I am well prepared for defense."

The bandit's eyes danced.

"So," he said, craftily, "you think you have your treasure well guarded. But an armed escort would do no harm. Myself and my men, valiant fighters all, will enter your service for pay."

Again the outlaw doffed his sombrero with mock suavity.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LABYRINTH.

AGAIN Frank Reade, Jr., played his part in the farce. He returned the salute just as affably.

"You honor me, noble señor," he replied. "But we have no need of an escort. Therefore we respectfully decline your offer."

"As well, señor," responded the outlaw, still more graciously. "At least, you will not refuse us the pleasure of riding a ways with you?"

Frank was enjoying the subterfuge of the rascal. It reminded him of the ancient story of the wolf and the lamb. But this time the lamb was not to be deceived.

So he replied:

"If you have fast horses, I may not object. I think, however, that it will tax their strength to keep up with us."

"Our horses are fleet," replied the outlaw, with a smile. "But if señor objects we will drink wine with him, if he will come down and meet us. We are *bou camarades* all, and you shall not be sorry for meeting us!"

"Indeed, I thank you," replied Frank, graciously. "Before I grant

your request, or rather, before I consider it with my friends, I wish to ask a question."

"Name it, señor, and it is already granted."

"Very well," replied Frank, with sudden gravity. "Have you met in the Chaco a certain American señor named Reginald Darrell?"

For one swift instant the features of the outlaw quivered. A quick flash of light sprung from his eyes. But it was only for an instant.

Then his face was as mobile and inscrutable as before.

"Señor, I can truly say that no Americano is with us," replied Black Juan. "Nor have we met one of your countrymen for a year past."

But Frank was not deceived.

He had instantly read the truth in that brief relaxation of the villain's features. It gave him a thrill.

Here was a cue.

He felt that the right track was gained. Time would do the rest.

"I regret my inability to gain news of my countryman," said Frank. "I must continue to search for him. There is no part of the Gran Chaco which I shall not scour until I find him."

"Ah, señor," replied the outlaw chief, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I fear that you will not meet with success."

"Why?"

"The Gran Chaco is a wild region. It holds many perils. There are bands of robbers, and to meet them there would be no chance for you. They would steal your splendid carriage and perhaps put the knife to your throat."

The outlaw smiled in a satanic way, showing a row of very fine white teeth. He looked a genuine Mephistopheles at that moment.

Frank, in spite of the security of his position could not help a shiver.

But he said:

"Do you think so? Then you do not know my strength. An army could not bring me to that."

The Spaniard affected surprise.

"Ah, you Americanos are men of spirit," he said.

"If you wish," said Frank, coolly. "I will give you an illustration of our ability to hold any foe at bay. You will see that we carry two powerful dynamite guns. Observe yonder point of rock on the shore of the lake. You shall be surprised at the result of a shot at it."

Black Juan hewed silently.

Frank spoke to Barney.

"Go down and load the forward gun," he said. "Draw a line on that headland of rock and blow it to powder."

"All right, sir!"

Barney vanished into the gun room. Some time elapsed before the gun was fired.

The Celt placed a dynamite shell in the breech. Then he drew a line on the distant headland.

It did not take him long to draw back the valve of the pneumatic tube. There was a slight recoil, and the shell was on its way.

The aim was exact.

It struck the huge cliff point blank. The result was astounding.

There was an explosion as if the place had been shaken by an earthquake. Up into the air rose a great column of smoke and debris.

When the cloud settled it was seen that the rocky cliff had been literally reduced to powder. The explosion of the dynamite had been terrific.

For a moment Black Juan sat immovable and speechless to his saddle. It must have been an astonishing display to him.

"Caramba!" he exclaimed finally. "You are in league with the devil, señor. That was a terrible shot."

"I have two of these guns," said Frank impressively. "What fancy you, can a foe accomplish against me?"

Black Juan bowed low.

"Your power is great," he said. "I shall not deign to aggravate you. Such an explosion!"

"That is only a single shot," said Frank coolly. "You may have occasion to see more some time."

"Count us your friends, señor."

"In that event," said Frank shrewdly, "you will not refuse to aid us in the finding of Darrell?"

The Spaniard's eyes glittered.

"Certainly not, señor. Have no fear, we will find him for you."

"Good!"

"Will you not descend and drink pulque with your sworn slave?"

"I must beg to be excused to day," replied Frank, warily. "I have just dined. I will ask you to step aboard and partake of mine."

The outlaw's face changed.

The trap which he would set for the young inventor did not work. He saw that Frank had penetrated his character and his game.

He was balled and angry. Yet he did not know what to do.

If he made a direct attack upon the Flash to effect its capture, the electric guns would blow him and his crew of cut-throats off the earth.

He saw that his only plan was to wait and embrace some future opportunity. So with almost ill grace he declined Frank's invitation. He was about to return now to his companions, when the young inventor called out:

"Pardon, Señor Juan! I would like to ask you another question."

"Si, señor," replied the rascal, "at your service."

"I have some curiosity to know where you and your men came from so suddenly a short while ago. You disappeared, only to reappear with remarkable promptness."

Every object, no matter how small, came in for a special and careful scrutiny.

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The young inventor sprang up with a sharp cry.

His surprise was well warranted. Delmont saw what had caused it. Far up the lake shore, so far, in fact, that they were hardly to be identified, were a number of mounted men.

There was no denying the fact. They were human beings on horses, and they were riding to the west along the lake shore.

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AGAIN Frank Reade, Jr., played his part in the farce. He returned the salute just as affably.

"You honor me, noble señor," he replied. "But we have no need of an escort. Therefore we respectfully decline your offer."

"As well, señor," responded the outlaw, still more graciously. "At least, you will not refuse us the pleasure of riding a ways with you?"

Frank was enjoying the subterfuge of the rascal. It reminded him of the ancient story of the wolf and the lamb. But this time the lamb was not to be deceived.

So he replied:

"If you have fast horses, I may not object. I think, however, that it will tax their strength to keep up with us."

"Our horses are fleet," replied the outlaw, with a smile. "But if señor objects we will drink wine with him, if he will come down and meet us. We are *bon camarades* all, and you shall not be sorry for meeting us!"

"Indeed, I thank you," replied Frank, graciously. "Before I grant

your request, or rather, before I consider it with my friends, I wish to ask a question."

"Name it, señor, and it is already granted."

"Very well," replied Frank, with sudden gravity. "Have you met in the Chaco a certain American señor named Reginald Darrell?"

For one swift instant the features of the outlaw quivered. A quick flash of light sprang from his eyes. But it was only for an instant.

Then his face was as mobile and inscrutable as before.

"Señor, I can truly say that no Americano is with us," replied Black Juan. "Nor have we met one of your countrymen for a year past."

But Frank was not deceived.

He had instantly read the truth in that brief relaxation of the villain's features. It gave him a thrill.

Here was a cue.

He felt that the right track was gained. Time would do the rest.

"I regret my inability to gain news of my countryman," said Frank. "I must continue to search for him. There is no part of the Gran Chaco which I shall not scour until I find him."

"Ah, señor," replied the outlaw chief, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I fear that you will not meet with success."

"Why?"

"The Gran Chaco is a wild region. It holds many perils. There are bands of robbers, and to meet them there would be no chance for you. They would steal your splendid carriage and perhaps put the knife to your throat."

The outlaw smiled in a satanic way, showing a row of very fine white teeth. He looked a genuine Mephistopheles at that moment.

Frank, in spite of the security of his position could not help a shiver.

But he said:

"Do you think so? Then you do not know my strength. An army could not bring me to that."

The Spaniard affected surprise.

"Ah, you Americanos are men of spirit," he said.

"If you wish," said Frank, coolly. "I will give you an illustration of our ability to hold any foe at bay. You will see that we carry two powerful dynamite guns. Observe yonder point of rock on the shore of the lake. You shall be surprised at the result of a shot at it."

Black Juan bowed silently.

Frank spoke to Barney.

"Go down and load the forward gun," he said. "Draw a line on that headland of rock and blow it to powder."

"All right, sir!"

Barney vanished into the gun room. Some time elapsed before the gun was fired.

The Celt placed a dynamite shell in the breech. Then he drew a line on the distant headland.

It did not take him long to draw back the valve of the pneumatic tube. There was a slight recoil, and the shell was on its way.

The aim was exact.

It struck the huge cliff point blank. The result was astounding.

There was an explosion as if the place had been shaken by an earthquake. Up into the air rose a great column of smoke and debris.

When the cloud settled it was seen that the rocky cliff had been literally reduced to powder. The explosion of the dynamite had been terrific.

For a moment Black Juan sat immovable and speechless in his saddle. It must have been an astonishing display to him.

"Caramba!" he exclaimed finally. "You are in league with the devil, señor. That was a terrible shot."

"I have two of these guns," said Frank impressively. "What, fancy you, can a foe accomplish against me?"

Black Juan bowed low.

"Your power is great," he said. "I shall not deign to aggravate you. Such an explosion!"

"That is only a single shot," said Frank coolly. "You may have occasion to see more some time."

"Count us your friends, señor."

"In that event," said Frank shrewdly, "you will not refuse to aid us in the finding of Darrell?"

The Spaniard's eyes glittered.

"Certainly not, señor. If ave no fear, we will find him for you."

"Good!"

"Will you not descend and drink pulque with your sworl slave?"

"I must beg to be excused to day," replied Frank, warily. "I have just dined. I will ask you to step aboard and partake of mine."

The outlaw's face changed.

The trap which he would set for the young inventor did not work. He saw that Frank had penetrated his character and his game.

He was baffled and angry. Yet he did not know what to do.

If he made a direct attack upon the Flash to effect its capture, the electric guns would blow him and his crew of cut-throats off the earth.

He saw that his only plan was to wait and embrace some future opportunity. So with almost ill grace he declined Frank's invitation. He was about to return now to his companions, when the young inventor called out:

"Pardon, Señor Juan! I would like to ask you another question."

"Si, señor," replied the rascal, "at your service."

"I have some curiosity to know where you and your men came from so suddenly a short while ago. You disappeared, only to reappear with remarkable promptness."

Black Juan showed surprise.

"Ah!" he exclaimed; "then you do not know. This is the honeycombed pampas. It is a labyrinth, señor. Beneath this surface so level there are passages in walls of limestone extending in all directions. We rode down into one of these passages and rode out again."

Frank listened with amazement.

This was a wonder of the pampas of which he had never heard—a honeycombed plain and a subsoil of limestone. It was a revelation.

Black Juan now rode back to his companions. There was a brief consultation held.

"What do you think of it, Frank?" asked Delmont. "I think that fellow is a rascal."

"So do I," replied the young inventor, "and moreover, the shrewdest one I ever met."

"I noticed his change of countenance when you asked about Reginald Darrell."

"Exactly. I think fortune has placed us on the right track. We can do no better than to follow him persistently."

"He is a cut-throat. How quickly he would attack us if he dared."

"That he would."

"But this curious labyrinth under the plain—do you imagine it is the stronghold of this gang?"

"I can hardly form an opinion as yet," replied Frank. "I am inclined to believe that they seek refuge there at times. We will take a look at it."

With this Frank stepped into the pilot house. He moved the motor lever and the machine rolled forward.

He approached what was now seen to be a kind of circular depression in the plain, unnoticed until one got almost upon it.

This depression was fully twenty feet deep, and a yawning aperture was seen to lead into the underground. This was fifteen feet in height and fully capacious enough to admit of the passage of the Flash.

The outlaws reined their horses aside as the Flash approached. They were now seen at close quarters.

And a worse cut-throat gang the sun never shone upon.

There were pure bred Spanish rustians, half-breed Indians, and in fact types of many nationalities. They regarded the explorers in an insolent manner.

The Flash came to a stop on the verge of the depression. The explorers crowded to the pilot-house windows, and studied the entrance to the labyrinth with interest.

Seeing this, Black Juan again rode forward and cried:

"Will you enter the labyrinth, señor?"

Frank hesitated before making reply. He exchanged glances with Delmont. The detective looked dubious.

"I hardly know what to advise," he said. "There can be little risk."

"That is true," agreed Frank. "But in the meanwhile, what are we to gain by it? We may lose sight of these rascals, and it is our plan to follow them until we get some trace of the whereabouts of Darrell."

"That is true. But it is my opinion that we cannot always succeed in keeping them in sight. They will drop from our view at times, but I think we can find them again."

"Enough!" cried Frank. "We will take a look at the interior of the labyrinth in any case."

So the young inventor replied to Black Juan.

"We are deeply interested in this strange freak of nature and shall pay a brief visit to the labyrinth."

"We shall be glad to guide you," replied the Spaniard. "We have torches."

"Torches we do not need," replied Frank. "Our electric search-light is far superior. We thank you, however, and will be glad if you will lead the way."

Black Juan bowed and motioned to his men. They galloped in a body into the labyrinth.

Then the Flash followed.

Down into the white walled passage the party went.

CHAPTER V.

THE ISLAND RUIN.

FRANK instantly turned on the electric lights. The search-light made all like day in the labyrinth.

Astounded beyond measure, the outlaws looked back, and were blinded by that great blaze of light. To them it was terrifying.

Reared as they were in the untutored wilds, the forces of electricity were an unknown and mysterious quantity. They could not grasp the puzzle.

They kept on, therefore, in a huddled group until suddenly the passage expanded, and they came out into a great cavern chamber exceeding many yards in circumference.

The roof of this was supported by many pillars, which looked as if they had been chiseled by the hands of man.

It was a glittering scene, as revealed in the white light of the search lamp. Our explorers gazed upon it spellbound.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Delmont, "this is wonderful indeed. Who would ever have dreamed of the presence of such a retreat under the rolling plains of the Chaco?"

"True enough," agreed Frank. "Hello! what is the matter now?"

There was cause for this query. Suddenly, and without warning, the Spanish outlaws scattered at full speed into various passages of the labyrinth.

In a brief moment they had utterly passed from view. It was an unexpected and startling move.

Astonished, the explorers gazed at each other.

"Bejabers! that's phwat I call a French leave," cried Barney.

"Golly! dey ain't quite so perlite as dey was," mentioned Pomp.

"It is easy to understand," said Delmont, with a smile. "They distrust us as fully as we distrust them. They know that they cannot hoodwink us, so they will get away to a safe distance and try some new dodge to annihilate us. You may be sure that the mask is off."

"That is well," declared Frank. "It must have come off sooner or later, anyway. Let them go! We shall run up against Black Juan again."

"You may be sure of that," cried Delmont. "But the question is, what are we to do now?"

There was a moment of silence.

"We might as well go back to the plain," declared Frank. "I do not think we shall find any trace of Darrell here."

He turned to Barney and gave orders to retrace the course to the outer air. The Cest went to the keyboard and started the Flash.

Into the passage they once more rolled. For some while the Flash followed it.

Then a startling fact became apparent. Somewhat strangely the passage began to narrow.

Steadily it grew narrower until Barney was obliged to stop the machine. It could go no further without danger of the hobs grazing the walls.

The truth was apparent. They had entered the wrong passage.

There was nothing to do but to retreat. Back the machine rolled until once more it was in the big chamber.

This time what was deemed the right passage was entered. On rolled the Flash for a long while.

But it soon became plain that they were once more in the wrong passage. However, a light was seen far ahead.

"It seems to be an outlet, anyway!" declared Delmont. "We may as well keep on!"

So they rapidly approached the gleam of daylight. In a few moments more the machine rolled out into the open air.

And a startling surprise was accorded the explorers.

They looked about instinctively for a glimpse of the pampas. But the boundless plains did not lay at their feet.

They were upon a small and rocky isle far out in the lake. It was a surprising transition.

"Well, I'm beat," cried Delmont. "Here is a go! It is evident that these passages ran under the lake."

"We have certainly passed under a part of the lake," declared Frank. "Nor is this the only island hereabouts."

This was true. There were several other islands in the vicinity. Whether the labyrinth led also to them could only be guessed.

But as the explorers began to look about the isle curiously they were given a great surprise.

Half hidden in a tangle of vines and a screen of beeches was a high walled building of white limestone.

It was an ancient ruin. The relic of a departed race. There are many of these ruins to be found in all parts of the Gran Chaco, full evidence that at some remote period a people of advanced customs dwelt in this part of the world.

Ages ago, they held sway in these wilds. Long since they had mysteriously passed from earth, leaving only these strange buildings behind.

The explorers gazed upon the ruin curiously.

And as they did so a strong impulse was upon them to explore it.

Delmont read this in Frank's face and said:

"It shall be as you say, Mr. Readie."

"I see no harm in taking a look at the place," declared Frank.

"Barney, you may go with us, and Pomp, you may guard the Flash until we return."

It was in order now for the explorers to equip themselves, and this they did. They took their Winchesters, loaded fully, and left the Flash.

As they knew not what peril they might have to encounter, they proceeded with the utmost of caution.

Approaching the ruin, Frank saw a dismantled arch. Vines partly covered this and ran along the escarpment for a great distance.

Pressing these vines aside, Frank pushed his way into a passage. Beyond this there was a glimpse of a courtyard.

And this courtyard was paved with round cobble stones, worked up on the lake shore. The court was in the shape of an ellipse, with high arches and windows above.

Once it had plainly been a beautiful building, and was no doubt the palace of some ancient nation.

He was long since dust, and who he was, or what he looked like, would never be known. All that was left was this remarkable pile of shattered limestone.

The three explorers stepped into the courtyard and looked about. Instantly Delmont gave an exclamation of horror.

"Look!" he cried.

The gaze of the three explorers became riveted upon a hideous spectacle.

Suspended from each arch of the further side of the court there hung a human form, stark naked. Against the explorers stood.

Naked were the victims, and their flesh had shriveled upon the bones so that they looked like mummies hanging there in the tropical atmosphere.

Then it could be seen that the stones of the courtyard were stained as with blood, long since partly washed out. A few rusty dirks and several carbines were scattered about.

It told but one story.

Some body of men had made of the ruin a temporary place of defense, and being overwhelmed, had paid the penalty with their lives. It was a horrible spectacle and yet of interest to the explorers, as a tragedy of the Gran Chaco. It was their province to investigate it.

Was it the work of Black Juan? If so, who were the victims?

Delmont ventured the opinion that it was some wandering body of herders, set upon and slaughtered by the outlaws.

"It is a common occurrence," he declared. "The wretches descend upon the herders and drive away their herds. If they resist they are slaughtered in a merciless fashion."

"That may be true," said Frank. "However, we will investigate."

They approached the scene of the tragedy. Developments swiftly proved Delmont was in error.

Beyond this court was another and here was a revelation of all.

On the pavement lay the skeletons of horses, and the saddles and broken pouches of a traveling party. Everywhere was scattered littered debris.

It told the tale of assault and victory, of pillage and plunder, of murder and violence.

The explorers began to examine the debris to, if possible, find a clew to the deed.

The saddles revealed nothing, as they were only such as were in common use among the heroes of the Argentine.

The robbers had taken away all articles of value, so that it was impossible to find out anything in that way.

But in the pocket of a torn jacket Delmont found a small diary or notebook. On the fly leaf was written in good English:

"VICTOR DANE, New York, U. S. A.
Mining Engineer and Expert Geologist."

The diary was filled with closely written pages. Delmont saw at once that these would explain all.

With Frank's aid he hastily read them.

The diary opened in New York city. The first entry told of the formation of a mining company to locate a rich claim on the upper La Plata River.

Gold and diamonds were both to be sought. There were twenty strong men in the party, and they were to ride overland from the frontier through the Gran Chaco.

Page by page the incidents of the journey were followed until the lake was reached.

Here they found the entrance to the labyrinth, and thence reached the island with its ruined palace. Then an attack was made upon them by a large body of outlaws.

Here the diary closed.

The rest could be easily inferred.

The attack by the outlaws had proved a success, and the mining company had lost their lives and their effects. It was a dark tragedy.

"This, no doubt, was the work of Black Juan," said Delmont, in a steely voice. "He is a fiend."

"Pardon, searol! Do you refer to Juan Martinez?"

Astounded Frank and Delmont turned. There before them, with mocking smile and arms folded across his chest, stood Black Juan.

CHAPTER VI.

IN CAPTIVITY.

BACK of the Spanish outlaw was a long line of armed men. They stood like statues, each with a carbine levelled at the explorers.

In an instant all saw that they were in a literal trap. It was a fearful moment.

Delmont stared at the daring Spaniards and his face grew livid. Barney drew back the hammer of his rifle.

But Frank was as cool and unconcerned as if in a drawing-room instead of facing a mighty peril.

"Mercy on us!" gasped the detective. "We are lost!"

Black Juan smiled.

"The fortunes of war are strange, señor," he declared. "It is not always the stronger side which wins."

"This is a cowardly trick!" flashed Delmont. "It is only worthy of a Spaniard and a dog."

Juan showed his teeth.

"The Americano can talk," was his reply. "But Black Juan can kill."

"Then murder us as you have these poor wretches whose bones lay

about us. But remember that our deaths will not go in vain; a theirs have."

"It is for the victor to boast, señor," said Juan, sibilantly. "Be kind enough to lay down your arms."

It was a desperate moment.

Indeed it did not seem as if the explorers had a chance for their lives.

The Flash with Pomp aboard was several hundred yards away. Indeed, it did not appear to be of any use to signal him.

Black Juan read their thoughts and smiled.

"You are beyond help!" he said. "The first signal made will result in the death of you all. It is possible that I may extend clemency to you if you give me no trouble."

"Bejabers, we're in for it, Mis'her Frank," whispered Barney.

"Give yerself up an' save yer loives. I'll try an' save yez."

Before Frank could comprehend what Barney meant, a startling thing happened.

The Celt had been standing near one of the great pillars.

He had with Celtic shrewdness taken in every detail of the situation. He had counted all chances for escape.

And when he did act, it was with lightning-like rapidity. As Frank and Delmont gave up their rifles, he made an astonishing move.

Quick as a flash, he dropped back upon his shoulders and turned a lightning-hack somersault behind the pillar.

The rifles of the outlaws blended in one volley, but they rattled against the limestone. The Celt shot out through a distant arch like a canon-ball.

They might as well have tried to stop the sun in its course. Barney vanished beyond the ruin.

In an instant all was uproar.

A score of the outlaws dashed in pursuit. Others buried Frank and Delmont to the ground, and bound them.

They were hopeless prisoners, but Barney was free, and this was something to cheer them.

If they were not executed at once there was a fighting chance for their lives. They clung to this hope.

The Celt was not recaptured.

A detour brought him back to the Flash safely. He threw his cap down into the sea, which misled the outlaws.

As he burst aboard the Flash, Pomp met him with staring eyeballs.

"Wha' am de mattah, chile?" he gasped. "Yo' looks all out ob breaf."

"Begorra, the devils have got thim!" wailed Barney. "Shure, naygur, it's a black day for ns all. Mis'her Frank and Delmont are in the power av the outlaws!"

Pomp could have fainted. But he did not.

"Gelly fo' glory!" he gasped; "wha'ebber is we gwine to do, chile?"

"Bejabers, we must resky thim!" declared Barney, vigorously. "au' there's no toome to lose, either."

"I'se wil yo', honey! Whn' are dem rapscallions? Jes' let dis chile git his hands on der!"

Barney ran to the pilot-house and started the machine up the incline toward the ruin. Up to the very arch of the palace it went.

As the only obstruction which prevented the machine entering the courtyard was a mass of vines, Barney ran the Flash straight into them.

The machine crashed through and into the courtyard. But not a sign of the outlaws or their prisoners was to be seen.

They had vanished.

Where they had gone it was not easy to say. Barney was much chagrined and almost frantic.

Around the courtyard the Flash ran, and then cut into a broad expanse beyond. But the outlaw gang, with their prisoners, were beyond pursuit.

"Begorra, I'd give me head to know where the devils have gone!" cried the Celt.

"Golly! I don't see wha' we is gwine to do?" wailed Pomp.

"Whurroo! Phwat is that?" cried the Celt.

There was good reason for the exclamation. The patterning of bullets against the steel shell of the Flash was heard.

The shots came from an angle of the ruin. The outlaws could not be seen.

Of course, the bullets did no harm. But though Barney and Pomp replied with their Winchesters, they dared not use the electric guns for fear of injuring the prisoners.

The exchange of shots was kept up for some time. Then, suddenly, a man appeared at an angle of the ruin with a white flag.

"Hi, darl!" cried Pomp. "Dey wants to surrender lish."

"Civil a bit," retorted Barney. "It's more loikely if ye're afther usking us to surrender. Begorra, av he'll talk English I'll speake wid him!"

Barney stepped out on the forward platform, and cried:

"Phwat do yez want?"

It was Black Juan. That he understood English was plain, for he replied in that tongue:

"I ask you to surrender, señors. You cannot leave the Gran Chaco alive. You are surrounded by our men, and you will do well to yield. We will give you quarter."

Barney grew red in the face.

"So that's phwat yez are afther, yez omadhoun," he cried. "Phwat do yez take me for? Shure, ay yez don't give up Mis'her Frank au'

the daytoctive, I'll be afther huntin' yez until yez are kilt in 'irely!"

"Then you refuse to surrender?" asked the outlaw chief.

"I've gottin' to surrender, for shure!" retorted Barney.

"You shall pay for this with your lives," shouted the outlaw, angrily. "I will see that you are tortured to death. It is a bad day for you when you defy Black Juan."

"Here's to yez after death, Misster Black Wan or Black Jack, or any other ould thing," roared Barney. "Shure, av yez want to have a ruction, I'm ready for yez any tyme. Be alther bringin' yure min out here wherewere I kin get a shot at them."

But the outlaw chief had vanished. Again a storm of bullets rattled against the Flash.

Barney had barely time to gain the cabin. He narrowly missed being shot.

"Bad cess to the devils!" he gritted. "Shure, I'll give them wan shot an' risk it. It's hopin' Misster Frank will get no harum from it."

With this, the Celt rushed below and trained the forward dynamite gun.

He trained it on the angle of the ruin and fired it.

The dynamite shell struck the corner of the limestone wall full and fair. The effect was tremendous.

The entire angle was blown into powder. In the debris were several bodies of the outlaws.

Barney's shot had not been without effect. A chorus of maddened yells came from the ruins.

Then all was quiet.

Barney ran the machine close up to the spot. But the villains had fled.

Several mangled bodies lay in the ruins. This was all.

However, one telling blow had been struck. It was now in order to follow it up.

But just how this was to be done, Barney was at a loss to decide.

He could think of no place in the ruin where the outlaws could be in hiding.

It seemed to him that they must have fled back into the labyrinth. He decided to go back there.

So the machine was turned back and headed for the cavern entrance. Soon it ran into it, and then the electric lights were again turned on.

Through the limestone corridors the Flash sped on.

But no sign of the outlaws was to be seen. If they had entered the labyrinth, they had managed to get out of sight quickly.

And how dark and dismal were the misgivings which seized upon Barney.

"Bejabbers, I'm afther bein' hate ont intoirely," he cried. "Shure, I don't know whether to kape on or to go back to the island onct more."

"Golly! I don't see where dey kin be hidin' on de island," objected Pomp.

"But, be me sowl, there's so many places for thim to hoide in this cavern that we niver cud run him down in a liseftoime," averred Barney.

"I believe youse right, chile. It am jes' all luck an' chance if we catchea dem!"

"Begorra, av it warn't for this cavern, shure we'd be afther gittin' them in quick toime. They niver cud outran the Flash!"

"Youse right dar, honey. Jes' all we kin do is to keep on!"

And this they proceeded to do. The machine soon had left the passage and entered the great chamber, which it had left somewhat previous.

Thus far not a sign had been seen of the foe.

Barney had begun to seriously think of returning to the island when an unexpected thing happened.

Suddenly the clatter of horses' hoofs and the crack of rifles was heard coming from one of the passages.

The two explorers rushed to the pilot-house window. They turned the search-light on full blast.

CHAPTER VII.

A LUCKY ESCAPE.

FRANK and Delmont were hopeless prisoners. They were bound and led away quickly through the court.

Then they were blindfolded and felt themselves being led over rough ground, and by the chill air knew that they were underground.

At first they imagined that they were in the labyrinth. Yet it seemed to Frank likely that the descent was too great.

Wherever they were going, they could not doubt that it was into the stronghold of the outlaws.

Whether they would ever come out alive or not was a problem.

Both were brave men, and neither was afraid to die. Yet they felt that death was close upon them.

Black Juan was a merciless foe. There was no good reason why he should spare their lives.

After a while their blindfolds were removed, and they saw that they were in a small square chamber with dark, damp walls. An iron door was the means of entrance.

Five Spanish outlaws stood by them. When their bonds were cut these captors without a word turned about and left them.

The iron door clang'd shut, and the two prisoners were left in the blackest of darkness.

It was some moments before either recovered. Then Delmont said: "How in the world did we allow them to put up this game on us? What fools we were!"

"Fools or not!" exclaimed Frank, "it is done and here we are."

"Without hope?"

"No, not that."

"Why so optimistic?"

"There is always hope while there is life!"

"That is a true saying. Then we will not give up. We have the use of our hands and feet, and our brains are not fettered. Can we not find a way to get out of this scrape?"

"We can try."

"What do you suggest?"

"First, let us see what kind of a place this is we are in?"

"Good!"

They at once began to feel their way along the walls. But presently Frank put his hand into an inner pocket, and drew out a leather case. He opened it. In it was a small battery and a coil of wire with an incandescent bulb.

It was a cleverly constructed electric lantern. It would burn quite a number of hours before the battery would need recharging. In consigning the prisoners to the cavern cell, the outlaws had neglected to search them.

So they even had knives and pocket pistols about them. This proved a fortunate thing.

The electric lantern made all as plain as day in the cell. They saw at once that it had been partly constructed by the hands of man.

The iron door was set in a frame of solid masonry. There were great bolts upon it.

Doubtless, this dungeon was many feet underground, and certainly it was a place from which prisoners could not hope to easily escape.

How they might force the door was a quandary to the two prisoners. But as a strange fate willed it, this did not prove necessary.

A great stroke of luck was theirs.

The guards in going out had over shot the bolts in the door. They had slid over the keepers instead of into them. This left the door unfastened.

With an astonished whisper, Delmont put a hand upon the latch and pulled the door wide open.

"By Jupiter!" he whispered, "luck is with us, Frank."

"I should say so," replied the young inventor, in an elated manner. "This passes all understanding. Perhaps it means our freedom."

"We must take no chances."

"Right you are!"

"I will let you lead the way."

"Very well."

Frank emerged into a dark corridor. He flashed the electric light up and down it.

Nothing was seen of any of the outlaws. Doubtless, they never dreamed of the possibility of the prisoners making an escape.

Deeming them as safe as could be in the dungeon, they had left them without further guard. All this was in the favor of our explorers.

But now that they were out of the dungeon, the next thing was to get out of the cavern entirely.

They believed that Barney had made good his escape and was now with Pomp.

"They are doubtless working for our rescue," declared Frank. "I know them well enough, to be sure that they will leave nothing undone."

"Then it must be our purpose to effect a junction with them as soon as possible!"

"Exactly!"

"Which direction ought we to follow?" asked Delmont.

There was no way but to trust to chance. So Frank turned to the right.

Along the underground passage they crept. It ascended rapidly, and it seemed certain that it would eventually bring them into the light of day.

But after awhile it began again to trend downward. Frank came to a halt.

"I don't believe we came here by this passage," he declared. "I do not remember an ascent."

"Nor I," agreed Delmont. "We are certainly in the wrong passage."

"Shall we go back?"

"I think we had better."

Both turned to retrace their steps, but at this moment an unlooked-for thing happened.

Distant cries were heard, and several shots. It brought the escaping prisoners again to a stop.

Then glimmering lights were seen far down the passage. For a moment they stood inactive.

Then Frank cried:

"Come! We are risking our lives by staying here. We must fly."

"Down this descent?" asked Delmont, dubiously. "We shall be going further into the depths of the earth."

"There is no other way. Come, we must hasten for our lives."

Away they sped at full speed. The electric lantern showed the way.

And now their path became rougher and harder to travel. The walls of the passage converged, and at times it became necessary to squeeze their way through a narrow space. A deadly fear was upon them that the passage would end entirely.

This would mean recapture or a battle to the death.

In spite of their best efforts the pursuers gained upon them. Soon rifle balls whistled through the passage.

"We must retaliate," declared Frank. "It will be our only course to keep them back."

With this they opened fire with their revolvers.

This had the desired effect of for a time holding the pursuers back. But the supply of pistol cartridges soon gave out.

The passage now began to trend upward again.

On they staggered, exhausted and breathless. The outlaws were not far behind. Again they opened fire with their rifles. The situation was now a dangerous one.

At any moment they were liable to be struck by any flying bullet. This would mean ruin and death.

But at this juncture, when all looked black, the detective suddenly pointed ahead, and cried:

"What do you call that? Is it a gleam of light?"

Something light showed up ahead. Whether it was daylight or not could not yet be decided.

On they sped, and suddenly Frank cried:

"By Jove! we are in luck! It is the search-light of the Flash."

"Do you believe it?"

"Certainly!"

"What is ahead of us there? If that is the outer air, it must be after dark, or they would not be using the search-light."

"We shall soon know," declared Frank. "A hundred yards will bring us there."

And this proved true.

The outlaws were now close behind, and their cries made the cavern passage ring. The next moment the two fugitives burst out into the big chamber.

There was the Flash, and it was at this moment that Barney and Pomp at the close of a preceding chapter were given such a surprise.

As they beheld the two escaped prisoners appear in the chamber, their surprise and joy knew no bounds.

Barney threw open the cabin-door, and leaped over the rail.

"Whurrroo!" he shouted. "Shure, Muster Frank, here we are, an' may the howly saints be praised! Come quick, sor!"

The two fugitives, breathless and spent, reached the rail of the Flash, and Barney hauled them aboard.

They were just in time.

The next moment a score of the pursuers burst out into the cavern chamber. The place boomed with their yells.

In its excitement Barney performed a rash and well nigh fatal act.

"Bad cess to the omadhouns!" he roared. "May the devility away wid them! Shure, I'll spoil their game."

He sprang to the electric gun and fired it at the foe. The shell struck in their midst.

It was a thoughtless and a mad act, and was bitterly repented by the Celt.

With a thunderous roar the shell exploded. Then what followed ballyhoo description.

The outlaw gang faded from view in a second, and detonations filled the echoing chambers. Huge portions of the limestone walls came tumbling down.

It was a moment of ruin.

It seemed as if the entire cavern was about to fall and engulf the explorers and the Flash forever. The ground shook as if in the throes of an earthquake.

Great heaps of limestone were piled up about the Flash, and every cavern passage seemed blocked. To all appearance they were hemmed in and literally buried alive.

The position of the machine was a fearful one. It seemed at that moment as if it was impossible to ever extricate her.

The young inventor threw open the cabin door and went out on deck.

The sight which met his gaze was truly an appalling one.

For a time it seemed as if his courage must forsake him. The situation looked hopeless, indeed.

The search-light showed all as plain as day. Very fortunately, however, no material injury had been done to the Flash.

Some of the falling bits of limestone had dented the steel shell of the machine and bent the rail.

But beyond this all was right. The question now was: How were they to get back to the upper world?

In that moment Frank did not believe that it would ever be possible to get the Flash out of the cavern. He fancied that some avenue of escape might exist for the explorers, but not for the machine.

However, he was disposed to first make sure of this. He descended from the deck and made a circuit of the chamber.

Every arch was completely blocked up but one.

This was partly filled, and it seemed to Frank a possible thing to cut a way through it for the Flash.

He called Barney and Pomp, and all at once went to work.

The limestone was not heavy and easily handled. In fact, a sharp chisel would cut it easily.

They worked like beavers for hours.

And not without recompense. Soon the limestone blocks began to give way, and in time the arch was cleared. A clear passage lay beyond.

The next thing was to clear a path to the Flash. Great blocks of stone lay in the way.

But Barney and Pomp, with heavy iron bars, had soon removed these. The machine rolled forward and entered the passage.

All were fatigued beyond measure, but none were ready to sleep.

"Not until we reach the open air again," declared Delmont. "Once we get back there, you may be sure that I will never venture underground again. The horror of being buried alive underground is too great."

All were of this same opinion. But the machine was now traversing the passage.

On it rolled as fast as the nature of the cavern floor would permit. It seemed as if the passage had unlimited windings, and was utterly without end.

Hours passed and still no end to the passage came. Delmont, haggard and hollow-eyed, paced the deck.

"This is tough," he declared. "Is there no end to this infernal cavern? We must be somewhere near the center of the earth by this time."

"We must find the end of it some time," said Frank. "Be patient."

"Fate has conspired against us from the first," lamented Delmont.

"At this rate we shall never be able to find a trace of Darrell." In the exciting events of the past twenty-four hours, the object of the exploration had been lost sight of. The missing millionaire, Darrell, had been quite forgotten.

But suddenly the passage began to trend upward.

The walls spread and the roof suddenly ceased. All looked up and saw the heavenly canopy above.

It was the sky of midnight, with myriads of twinkling stars. But the cool night air fanned the faces of all.

A shout of joy escaped the lips of the underground travelers. It was a sensation like to that of the prisoner of the Bastile, who, after long years of imprisonment, suddenly finds himself free in the glorious light of day.

"Heaven be praised!" cried the detective fervently. "That is like coming back from the dead."

"Bejabers, yez kin be shure I'll never foire the electric gun underground agin," cried Barney.

It was midnight on the Pampas and as the machine rolled out upon the swelling plain Frank turned to the cabin stairs.

"Shut every door and window," he commanded. "Put out the alarm wires, Barney. We must all have rest and sleep."

"All roight, sir!"

The Celt quickly leaped over the rail and made a wide circuit of the machine with the alarm wires. These were so arranged that nobody could approach the Flash without the starting of a battery which would ring an alarm gong.

This made things practically safe aboard the Flash. All were thus enabled to seek sleep.

Nor did they lose time about it. They flung themselves down just where they were able, and soon all were in the deepest slumber.

How long they slept they never knew. But they were suddenly aroused by the ringing of the alarm.

In an instant all were upon their feet. Frank was the first to reach the deck.

A horseman was on the line of wire not twenty yards distant from the Flash. He was to all appearances a herder, and his face was seen to bear the marks of serious wounds.

He reined in his horse and shouted cheerfully:

"Buenos, senors! A friend salutes you."

"A friend!" cried Frank. "Who are you, senor?"

"I am Jose Mantillo, and God has aided me in escaping from the accursed power of Black Juan, into whose service I was impressed on pain of death. Give me cheer, senors, for I am an honest man, and seek only to get back to my good friends in Buenos Ayres. If you will help me I will give you valuable news."

Delmont was by Frank's side and heard this declaration. For a moment the detective and the young inventor gazed at each other.

CHAPTER VIII.

BURIED UNDERGROUND.

HORRIFIED beyond measure, Frank Reade, Jr., regained his feet and rushed into the pilot house.

"What have you done, Barney?" he cried. "Why did you fire that shot?"

"Ach, wirra, wirra, bad luck to me stupid head!" wailed the Celt. "Shure, I never thought it wud come to that. It's kill wo all are, an' I'm to blame!"

"We are certainly done for," said Delmont, with ashen face. "The whole thing is caved in, Frank."

"Golly, fo' glory!" gasped Pomp. "Wha' ebber did yo' do dat fo', fish?"

"Ach, murther, murther," bemoaned Barney. "I wish I had never been born."

"Stop your foolishness," cried Frank, sternly. "This is no time for crying over spilt milk."

"What do you think?" asked Frank. "Can we trust him?"

"He is a Spaniard!"

"Yet he comes alone, and his story may be true. We can take no great chances in allowing him to come aboard and tell his story."

"We are four to one. Certainly not."

With this Frank answered the other.

"Dismount from your horse and come aboard," he said. "If you tell us the truth, we will take you safely back to Buenos Ayres and reward you well."

"Jesus bless you!" replied Mantillo, slipping from his horse's back.

"I am an honest man, and will prove it."

A few moments later he was in the cabin of the Flash and telling his story.

And it was a wonderful revelation.

He told first of the incidents which led to his becoming a bandit of the Gran Chaco. He described his home in Buenos Ayres, and how he was captured in the Pampas by Black Juan, and his life was only spared by his agreeing to become a bandit.

"But I can tell you that of value, señors," he declared. "Black Juan is not a native of these plains. He is a Spaniard, born in Madrid, and for a while was consul in America. While there his name was Pedro Sagasta, and among his intimate friends was Waldo De Mar, a wealthy scion of a New York family."

"Waldo De Mar!" gasped Delmont. "Why, he is dead!"

"Not so, señor," replied Mantillo, steadily.

"Do you mean it?"

"I do."

"Where is he, then?"

"At the present moment he is in the Gran Chaco. He is in league with Black Juan."

"In league with Black Juan! Then he is an outlaw?"

"No, señor, not that, but worse; a would-be murderer and thief. You are looking for a certain Señor Darrell, a very wealthy American, who disappeared from his home a year ago?"

Delmont drew a deep breath. His eyes gleamed like stars.

Here was the possible explanation of a great mystery. All seemed now within his grasp. His brain for a moment danced, then grew calm.

"Yes," he replied; "do you know where this Señor Darrell is?"

Without a tremor of his facial muscles the outlaw replied:

"Si, señor."

The detective sprang up. Every muscle was taut. He glared at the other.

"Where?" he asked, hoarsely.

"One hundred miles from here, in the hills of the Chaco, señor. Be calm. He is safe at present, though heavily stupefied with drugs. They will not kill him until their plans are perfected."

For a moment a pin could have been heard to drop. Then the detective looked at Frank.

"My soul," he exclaimed. "This is a greater stroke of luck than I had dared hope for."

"It looks well!" said Frank. "It proves one thing plainly."

"What?"

"The missing man, Darrell, did not leave home of his own accord."

"He was abducted."

"Yes!"

"For what purpose?"

"That we have to learn. But that Waldo de Mar; who is he?"

"Mrs. Darrell's brother."

"Then he is Darrell's brother-in-law. Doubtless, he is the one who abducted the millionaire."

"I can tell you all, señors," said Mantillo. "Sagasta, or Black Juan, and De Mar are only members of a gang who have stupefied the millionaire with drugs, and forced him to accompany them seemingly of his own volition to the Gran Chaco."

"Here they hold him prisoner. I overheard their plans. When they have induced him to sign certain papers they will murder him, and then return to New York and seize his property. It is a case of robbery. De Mar is penniless, and so is Sagasta. The latter is madly in love with Mrs. Darrell, and hopes to win her after her husband's death. This is the whole distasteful plot."

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE HILLS.

It was an overwhelming revelation. The atrocity of the scheme now overcame the listeners.

"Mantillo," said Delmont, with emotion, "you have done us a great favor. We shall go to extremes to repay you. Henceforth you are our guest aboard the Flash. Is that right, Mr. Read?"

"It is!" replied Frank, warmly. "But I must ask another question."

"What?"

"Do you know where Darrell is now kept a prisoner?"

"Si, señor," replied Mantillo; "in the Chaco hills, one hundred miles from here."

"Then we should go thither?"

"At once, señor. You are losing time by remaining here."

"Do you know the way thither?"

"I do."

"One word more," put in the detective; "do you remember the message we received just as we were boarding the boat in New York, Frank?"

"I do," replied the young inventor.

"Then you can see now that I was right. It was only a game of the gang—part of whom are probably yet in New York—to hold us there for awhile."

"A clever decoy."

"Exactly!"

"But it did not work," said Frank, springing up. "Let us be off to the Chaco Hills at once. We will allow you to make the course, Señor Mantillo."

"I thank you, señors."

"Where is Black Juan now?"

"Fully fifty miles on his way thither. He left here last night with the remnant of his men. He will there make a stand against you."

"Then we will arrive there about as quickly as he does. When did you escape him?"

"Just as he was leaving the island in the lake," replied Mantillo. "I meant to strike out for the east coast and make for Buenos Ayres. There lives my aged mother and my betrothed. I ask only of God that I may reach them safely."

"You may be sure of it," cried Delmont. "We are your friends, and you shall have reward enough to buy you a ranch."

Mantillo's eyes glittered with joy.

"I thank you, señors," he replied. "Jose Mantillo is a true man." At once the Flash set out at full speed for the northern Chaco. Over the level plains it ran with the speed of an express train.

It was a rare turn of luck which had brought Mantillo to them. All in a moment it seemed as if fortune had turned in their favor.

They had located Darrell and got at the bottom of the mystery of his disappearance all at one stroke. This was certainly encouraging. If they could reach the Chaco Hills and manage to in some way entrap Juan and De Mar, all would be won.

All that day the Flash ran on at great speed.

The plain was fairly smooth, and as nightfall came a distant range of hills rose above the horizon.

This was their objective point, and the voyagers gazed at them with mingled emotions. The next few days were to record thrilling incidents.

Thus far nothing had been seen of Black Juan or his party.

But over to the westward a party of herders were seen rounding up some long horns. At sight of them Mantillo's eyes gleamed and he said:

"It is lucky for them that Black Juan does not see them. Their necks would not be worth the halter. He would drive off their cattle in a twinkling."

"Do you believe that?" asked Delmont. "Could they not defend themselves?"

"Not against Black Juan, señor," said Mantillo. "Those cattle would be rebraided and sold in Buenos Ayres as the property of another man."

"It is rascally business," declared the detective. "It ought to be stopped. What is the matter with the Argentine Government that they will permit it to go on?"

Mantillo smiled.

"The government has all it can do to attend to its frontier affairs with Paraguay," replied the Spaniard. "The Gran Chaco is a great wilderness. It would require many regiments of soldiers to control it."

"Humph!" said Delmont, incredulously, "you haven't quite got up to the mark of a free country yet. The United States would stop it pretty quick."

Night was shutting down rapidly. It was evident that they could not enter the hills until morning unless they did so with the aid of a search-light.

As this would be revealing their position to the outlaws, and perhaps put them on their guard, if not invite an attack, it was deemed best to wait until the next day.

So the machine approached the hills cautiously in the gloom of the evening. Frank would allow no lights on board the Flash.

In a little hollow of the plain just at the base of the hills the machine came to a stop.

Here all was made snug for the night. Heavy clouds hung overhead threatening a storm.

The hills frowned dark and rugged in contour over the plain.

Like most of the ranges of the Gran Chaco, they were jagged peaks and cut up with devious passes and deep pockets.

In them were secluded recesses and natural fortresses, where a small body of men could hold many hundreds of bay.

The explorers sat out on deck watching the threatening sky and the outbrea of the hills as revealed against it.

As they did so, sulken thunder was heard in the west.

"We are going to have a storm," declared Delmont.

"It looks like it," agreed Frank.

"It may be a tempest, señors," said Mantillo. "But I do not think it can harm us in this depression. The wind is broken."

Both Frank and Delmont had heard of the tempests of the Pampas. They were akin to the cyclones of the Western prairies of America.

If the machine should be overtaken by one of these storms in an

exposed position serious damage might be done. But the position of the Flash was deemed secure.

No fear was felt. But as they continued gazing at the dark hills suddenly all gave a start.

A bright light glimmered in the darkness of the hills. Then it vanished.

"A light!" ejaculated Delmont.

"It can mean only one thing," said Frank. "The outlaws are somewhere up there."

Mantillo had sprang up.

He seemed excited.

"Ah!" he whispered. "There is the mountain home of Black Juan. We are very near it."

Delmont gave a start.

"I have an idea," he said.

"What is it?" asked Frank.

"Suppose we venture a little trip up there. I used to do a bit of scouting on the plains."

"It is worth thinking of," agreed Frank. "What do you think, Mantillo? Is it a feasible plan?"

The Spaniard was shivering.

It was plain that he was thinking of the vengeance of Black Juan. To be recaptured meant a frightful death.

There was slight wonder that he hesitated. Yet it was only for a moment.

"You may know, señors, what it means for me to be caught. Yet I am happy to go and show you the den of Black Juan. We shall have to be like the fox."

"Trust us for that Mantillo," said Delmont. "These outlaws are not keener than the North American Indian."

"I think not, señor!"

"One moment," said Frank, kindly. "If you fear the risk at all, Mantillo, I would beg of you not to go."

The Spanish outlaw seemed to struggle with himself. There was a moisture in his eyes as he finally replied:

"Mantillo is selfish. He yearns for the banks of the Rio Plata and the happy cottage home of his true love. There he knows that true hearts await him. It is the prayer of his heart to greet them. But Mantillo is no coward. He is not afraid to die. We will go!"

The Spaniard's teeth closed with a click and he drew himself up. There was a moment of silence.

Then Frank said:

"Of course, there is risk. But we shall go armed, and believe me, Mantillo, they will take you at the cost of our lives. We will defend you!"

"I thank you, señora."

In a few moments the party was ready. Barney and Pomp were to remain aboard the machine.

Armed to the teeth the three scouts set out upon their dangerous mission. Soon they were deep in the darkness.

The light among the hills was no longer seen.

Mantillo explained that it was probably a torch, carried by some one of the outlaws. The locality was about where the outlaw camp was.

"But they are very shrewd," declared Mantillo. "They will have guards in all parts of the hills. We shall have to be careful not to stumble upon one!"

"We will look out for that," said Delmont.

Silently they crept forward.

From time to time the detective panned and placed his ear to the ground. He listened long and carefully.

In this way they kept on up through a narrow pass. Suddenly Delmont stopped and whispered:

"I think there is a picket just above here. I will listen again."

He applied his ear to the ground. After awhile he arose, and whispered:

"It is true. I heard him ground his rifle butt. He is some fifty yards above here. I must take a closer look at him. Do you wait here?"

"One moment," whispered Frank.

"What?"

"You are not going alone?"

"It is the safest way. He would locate three of us easier. Do not fear. I will be back soon."

Delmont gripped Frank's hand. Then he slipped away into the gloom.

Time passed slowly. Suddenly Frank and Mantillo drew back against the wall of the pass.

They were none too soon. A tall, dark figure brushed past them near enough to be touched.

CHAPTER X.

THE MISSING MAN.

Who this was they could only guess. But it was doubtless one of the outlaws.

Frank thought of Delmont and could not help a shiver.

What if the detective should be discovered by this fellow? It would be equivalent to the stirring up of a hornet's nest.

"That won't do!" thought the young inventor. "We must be near to give him aid if necessary."

Up the pass went the crunching feet of the outlaw. Suddenly there stopped, there was a smothered cry, a scraping of gravel, and the low thud of a falling body.

Frank's blood almost turned to ice. Mantillo was like a marble statue.

The same thought was in the mind of each.

Was it Delmont who had thus been laid low? One, two, three minutes passed silently by.

Then Frank drew a breath of relief. He knew all was well.

If the detective had been the victim the entire outlaw camp would by this time have been aroused.

The position of the explorers would have become at once untenable. But no alarm was given.

All was silence in the defile.

"Delmont is a tramp!" whispered Frank. "He has done noble work."

At that moment a dark form glided up in the gloom. A sibilant whisper said:

"It's all right, friends. Come along! I've disposed of them."

"What?" whispered Frank, clutching the detective's sleeves. "Not two of them?"

"Yes, two of them. They will not trouble us more. The last fellow I had to meet face to face and he made some racket. But I don't think it was heard."

"Delmont, you're an Indian!"

"I learned much from Indians about scouting and woodcraft," replied the detective nonchalantly. "But they may outwit me yet. However, there is no time to lose. A relief may come for that guard, when the game would be up!"

"You are right. Then you think the coast is clear?"

"For this outpost. But there may be other pickets just beyond. I must endeavor to locate them."

"There are," whispered Mantillo. "Black Juan keeps two lines of pickets out. You may be sure of that."

"Very well, then," said Delmont; "I will try the next one, though I may not have such good luck. This fellow never knew what happened to him. A swift blow back of the ear with the butt of my pistol, and he sank without a groan."

Up the defile they now crept cautiously.

Every moment they drew nearer the outlaw's stronghold. The sound of murmuring voices and the faint notes of a dulcetina were plainly heard.

It was evident that Juan and his men were amusing themselves in a high fashion in their camp in the wilds.

"We will break that up for them," whispered Delmont, ironically.

"Ah, there is the second picket!"

The others saw nothing, but Delmont glided away into the gloom, whispering:

"He is my prize. Wait until I come back; then we will enter camp."

All this while Mantillo had been shaking like one with a fit of ague; yet he was no coward.

Delmont was gone fully five minutes. When he returned he was breathing hard.

"That fellow gave me a tussle," he whispered. "He meant to beat me. But I got the best of him. He will trouble us no more."

"Did you kill him?" whispered Frank.

"No. Like the other rascal, I gave him an anaesthetic with my club which made him dizzy. Then I unclasped him and stuffed a gag in his mouth. If he don't get free before we get away from here we shall be all right."

"Let us slide along then."

"Come on."

Again they crept up the defile. This time they came in sight of the camp. A remarkable sight it was.

A deep mouthed cavern yawned in the side of the hill. In the mouth of this there crouched a half hundred men around a camp-fire. They were the hardest looking lot of rascals our friends had ever seen.

Intently the three explorers gazed at them. It was a larger force than they could hope to attack.

The rascals were well dressed and well paid. But their features were brutish in the extreme.

After while Frank's gaze wandered beyond into the cavern. He wondered if this was the place where Darrell was kept.

Even as they were cogitating this matter, a startling thing happened.

Out of the cavern entrance there suddenly strolled a tall patrician-looking man. In an instant he was recognized. It was Darrell.

Delmont's heart leaped into his mouth. Behind the millionaire banker there walked a tall, darkly handsome man.

This was De Mar. He was the shadow, the all pervading presence or rather the evil spirit of the unfortunate banker.

Darrell's black luster eyes, his pallid face and strange erratic movements showed the power of the drug under the stupor of which he was.

And here was to be found the man in this wild out-of-the-way part of the world, who was supposed to be long missing and dead.

There was the master of millions, the owner of a happy home and a loving wife. And he was the victim of deadly things, of cutting blents who were endeavoring to unseat his mind, so that he might be induced to sign away his millions for their benefit.

What more rascally scheme could be imagined?

It seemed to our adventurers as if they must step in boldly and snatch Darrell from his deadly peril. But they could not.

They managed to creep near enough to overhear a desultory conversation between De Mar and his victim. The latter played his cards with consummate skill.

"To-day, my dearest friend," he said, "you shall sign the deed to the new Eldorado, of which you are to be sole king. Bright hours shall dance before you at will, and we shall live as did the prince of the fairy tale."

The millionaire listened in a listless way. He made a faint guttural reply.

"You will not refuse?" asked De Mar persistently. "Perhaps I had better bring you the papers now?"

Darrell shrugged his shoulders pitifully and began to weep like a child.

"I do not know where I am nor how I came here," he said in a husky voice. "But I want to go back to my former State. Where is the good angel who waits on me?"

De Mar laughed sardonically.

"The good angel has better things in store for you," he said. "Here is something to relieve the pain of your heart. Swallow it!"

The villain drew a phial from his pocket and took from it a tiny pill. This he gave to his victim.

"Swallow it!" he commanded.

The millionaire complied without a word. Then he sank down upon a ledge of rock just beyond the firelight.

He groaned dismally.

"It is all of no use!" he wailed. "I shall never recover. The brain is going to ruin every hour. Oh, what a deadly disease is this?"

Frank's nerves were on edge.

His sympathies, of course, were with the prisoner. He felt like jumping upon De Mar and ridding the earth of an atrocious villain.

He saw that in his present drugged state Darrell was impotent to act in his own behalfs. He was but a tool in the hands of unscrupulous people.

The necessity of rescuing him from De Mar was plainly seen.

But how was it to be done? It was a ticklish case. All complications could not be foreseen.

All this while low mutterings of thunder in the western sky gave evidence of a storm. It was certainly near at hand.

The outlaws had noted the fact, and had begun to pick up their belongings to move into the cavern.

De Mar and his charge now arose and walked, as chance had it, nearer to the spot where our explorers were.

A sharp, jagged lightning flash played across the mountain wall, and showed vividly the pallid, sickly face of Darrell.

"There is a storm coming up," commented De Mar. "I will call Murillo to take you inside."

De Mar gave a shrill whistle, which was instantly answered by a tall, handsome young Spaniard near by. But his beauty was of the evil type.

"Here, Murillo," said De Mar authoritatively. "Take this man to his couch. Stay there by him until I return."

"Si, señor."

The fellow led Darrell away into the cavern. De Mar stood in the shadows a moment. Then he whistled again in a peculiar way.

One of the outlaws leaped to his feet and approached.

It was Black Juan.

"You called me, Waldo?" he asked.

"I did!" replied De Mar. "I must have a talk with you!"

"There are no mischievous ears about?"

"None?"

They drew back deeper into the shadows and almost where Frank could have touched them.

It was a critical moment.

Our adventurers kept silent as the grave. What followed was of interest to them.

"A courier arrived last night," said De Mar. "He brought a letter from New York by way of Buenos Ayres!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Black Juan, eagerly. "From who——"

"Our safe ally there, Cardello. He tells of the departure of the curious electric wagon and the horse-trained inventor, Frenke Reade, Jr., for Buenos Ayres on the *Donna Anna*."

"They are here," said Juan. "I have fought them all day."

De Mar gave a violent start.

"Is that true?" he asked, angrily. "Why didn't you wipe them out? Don't let one escape alive. Cardello tried a decoy letter on them at the pier, but it failed. Understand, they must die!"

Black Juan drew himself up.

"You forgot!" he hissed. "I am not a dog to take commands!"

"Pardon me!" ejaculated the Mar. "It is my anxiety. Then, you must take a word from me. As you love my sister and hope to win her, as you hope for our fortunes, you must destroy these people."

"I will do so."

"Good! We must work sharp or we shall lose all. I have tried all day to make Darrell sign these papers. The moment he does that he dies, and then the game is won."

CHAPTER XI.

BROUGHT TO TERMS.

So cold-blooded was this declaration, that our adventurers experienced a fearful thrill of horror.

It showed the villainy of the man past all belief.

Mantillo trembled, and Delmont set his teeth tightly. But it was necessary to preserve the utmost care and caution.

"I am doing my part," said Black Juan, tersely. "I can do no more!"

"I understand that!"

"Is there no word from her?"

"Ah, that is your business to win her after the proofs of Darrell's death. His fortune will be swept away by these papers which he must sign. She will then be in poverty, and you are not a man if you cannot win a woman's love!"

Black Juan showed his teeth.

"You may trust me," he said, in a grinding voice. "There are many ways to win a woman."

Even De Mar, hardened villain as he was, winced at the significance of these words.

Frank's hand passed to the butt of his revolver. He could have shot the human cur at that moment.

But at this moment a gust of wind came whirling down the mountain wall. The two villains were alone in the space outside the cavern.

The outlaws had all scurried inside out of the approaching tempest. In Frank's opinion the time for action had come.

He arose like a swift and silent shadow on one side of the rifflaus; Delmont rose on the other.

Both looked into the muzzles of flashing revolvers.

"Hands up, or instant death is yours," said a grating voice. It was Delmont who spoke.

The sensations of the villains could only be imagined. Both stood like statues.

A curse trembled upon the lips of Black Juan, but Frank whispered in an ominous voice:

"Silence!"

Mechanically the two villains raised their hands. With them the game was up.

Swiftly Mantillo bound their hands behind them. They wore prisoners in a trice.

Then silently they were hustled away in the darkness. Just as they reached the delile, the storm burst.

For two long hours the elements raged. All this while the party cowered, drenched to the skin in a cleft in the cliffs.

When the rain finally ceased they emerged and went on down to the plain.

Straight to the Flash they went. There was not a light on board and it was necessary to give a signal to Barney and Pomp as they approached.

In a moment it was answered and the two prisoners were assisted on board. In the cabin, the curtains were drawn and a light turned on.

Smitten and discomfited the two villains stood face to face with their captors.

Awful hate glittered in the black eyes of De Mar. He was murderers at that moment.

Frank and Delmont seated themselves and regarded the villains silently for a time. Then Delmont said:

"Well, gentlemen, the tide has taken an unexpected turn."

De Mar scowled savagely.

"It is a very clever scheme which you have elaborated," continued the detective; "but villainy generally meets its reward. Your devotion to your sister, De Mar, is something pathetic."

The villain was speechless. He quivered with impotent rage.

"Instead of turning her over to the tender mercies of this Spanish ruffian, will it not be more humane for you to surrender her husband to her and wish her happiness for the rest of her life?"

"Curse you!" gritted De Mar, insanely. "If I had you once in my power I would crush you to a jelly!"

Delmont smiled.

"But you have not," he said; "nor are you likely to. It is better to be gracious to one at whose mercy you are. Now, I have a question to ask. Is your life dearer to you than the liberation of Darrell and the abandonment of this infamous plot?"

De Mar's face was ashen in its hue. His rage was unspeakable.

"I will never come to such terms," he gritted.

"Very well," said the detective coolly. "Kindly inform me which method of death you prefer?"

"I refuse to do that."

"Oh, you leave the choice to us then? Very well."

Delmont gave Frank the wink, and the latter said to Barney,

"Bring up a coil of wire. Attach it to that chair. Bind the prisoner to the chair for electrocution."

"Yes, sir!"

The coil vanished below. In a few moments he returned with the wire.

Then he and Frank advanced and forced De Mar into the chair. The wires were connected with the dynamos and an electric key applied.

"Then the discs were placed at the villain's feet. To insure instant death they would have been placed at the spine. But Frank was not so serious as he affected to be.

All this while the prisoner was obdurate. But now his pallor increased. He was weakening.

Frank took the key in his hand and turned the current partly on.

"Tell me when you are ready, Delmont," he said. "I'll send him to Topnet in a flash."

A fearful groan burst from the villain's lips. His veins stood out like whipcords, his eyeballs dilated and his body writhed.

Frank turned on a bit more.

"Mercy! mercy!" yelled the villain. "Don't kill me! I'll agree to anything. Oh, give me mercy!"

Frank turned off the current.

"That is more like it," he said. "You repent, do you? Ah, this is nothing to what you will experience when you reach Hades!"

The villain was in a cold sweat and trembling violently. Delmont lit a cigar and asked:

"How is it, De Mar? Do you come to terms?"

"I am in your power now. What are the terms?"

"You must set Darrell free. He must be delivered up to us safe and well. You must never show your face on American soil again."

"If Darrell will guarantee me one hundred thousand I will do it. He owes it to me on the ground of relationship."

"He owes you nothing but punishment," said Delmont, sternly.

"He has helped you many times only to meet with this kind of payment. Turn on the current again, Frank. He has not had half enough."

"No, no!" screamed the wretch; "I will agree for fifty thousand!"

"Not a cent."

Frank began to turn on the current.

"I consent," yelled the villain. "I will come to your terms!"

"Take him out of the chair, Barney," said Delmont.

The Celt obeyed.

In a moment the villain stood once more on his feet. No attention, so far, had been paid to Black Juan.

Now Mantillo advanced.

"Senor," he said, "will you surrender this villain to me for punishment?"

Frank and Delmont exchanged glances.

"No doubt you owe him a heavy grudge, Mantillo. But we do not believe in murder."

Mantillo's face flushed.

"I do not intend to murder him," he said.

"Then he is yours."

"I thank you."

Mantillo advanced and gazed straight into Black Juan's eyes. The latter glared wolfishly at him.

"Dog!" he gritted, as he writhed in his bonds. "If I had known you were a traitor, I would have flogged you alive long since!"

"You stole my herds and forced me to join your band," said Mantillo calmly. "Now I am your master, and you are my slave. If you care for your worthless life, you must pay for it."

"What is your ransom?" asked Juan coolly.

"You shall pay me ten thousand pesos in Spanish money to make good my losses. For that will enable me to start life anew. Will you do it?"

Frank and Delmont were now interested. As Black Juan seemed defiant, Delmont said:

"Give him a touch of the same medicine we tried on De Mar. That will bring him to time."

Barney and Pomp sprang forward, and would have set Sagasta or Black Juan in the electric chair. But De Mar cried:

"Have done, Pedro! They have got us tight. Our game is up. We must settle."

"You have spoken truly," cried Frank. "Your game is up!"

Black Juan, therefore, yielded.

"It shall be so!" he gritted. "But another day shall come!"

"You will never show your head outside the Gran Chaco," said Mantillo, confidently. "Senor, I thank you!"

"We told you we would stand by you, Mantillo," said Delmont.

"Now!" cried Frank. "Let us have the matter settled. First, the liberation of Darrell."

"I will promise to have him brought down at once with safe escort," declared De Mar, shrewdly. "Be so kind as to set me free."

Delmont smiled and strode up to the villain.

"Evidently you think we are greenhorns, De Mar!" he said. "Darrell must be delivered up to us here before you can be set free!"

Rage shone in the villain's eyes.

"Curse you!" he gritted. "Do you think I will trust you?"

"Why not?"

"What is to prevent your hanging me after you get Darrell into your hands?"

"You have our word of honor."

"Is it better than mine?"

"I hope so!"

"You insult me easily while I am helpless. Some day you and I will have a reckoning."

"All right," said Delmont carelessly. "This is my reckoning just now. You may suit yourself. Either Darrell or your life. It matters not."

The villain saw that his game was futile.

He was furious, but helpless.

"What do you propose?" he asked sullenly. "I am yielding everything."

"We shall wait for daylight," said Delmont. "Then we propose to send an envoy to your men with a safeguard from you."

"They will hang him!"

"Your life will pay for it!"

"Go on!" gritted De Mar.

"The envoy shall carry two messages."

"What are they?"

"First, Darrell is to be escorted safely down here and delivered up to us."

"Well?"

"Secondly, Senor Sagasta here shall send word that ten thousand pesos in Spanish money shall be sent down at the same time."

"And then?"

"You shall both be set free."

"All right!" agreed the villain. "Let it be quickly done. I shall live for the future. Retribution will come. You have the warning."

"Save your breath. Hero is ink and paper. Write the message. Daylight will soon come."

De Mar seated himself and wrote his part of the message. Then Black Juan did the same.

CHAPTER XII.

WHICH ENDS THE STORY.

It was only necessary to wait for daylight. And as Delmont declared this was near at hand.

Soon the dark sky began to grow light. The east grew rosy.

The storm had passed and all was now bright and clear. In a few hours the sun was above the horizon.

Sagasta was taken out on deck and with a whistle blew a signal. It was heard far up in the hills.

The outlaws at once answered it. They came trooping down through the defiles. A truce flag was hung out and one of them came quite near the machine.

He was indeed surprised to see his leader bound and a prisoner at the rail of the Flash.

Black Juan addressed him.

What proved better than a written message was given. Received verbally from the outlaw chieftain's lips the command had due effect.

In a short while two of the Spaniards appeared leading Darrell. Two others carried a heavy bag of coin.

Aboard the machine they came. The bag of coin was turned over to Mantillo, who counted it.

It was found correct. There were ten thousand pesos in Spanish silver.

At once Black Juan's bonds were cut. Then, as Darrell crossed the rail, De Mar was freed.

Barney leveled his rifle at them, and Delmont said:

"Seniors, we are square. Now you will believe us of your presence."

Scowling unckly, the villains slid over the rail. When safe in the defile, they hurled fierce curses at the voyagers.

Shots were fired at the Flash. But they were not heeded.

Frank gave Barney orders to steer a southward course. Then he went into the cabin, where Delmont was trying to make Darrell understand the situation.

But the powerful drug yet had such a hold upon the millionaire that he was able to comprehend but little of what was said to him.

Frank gave him various antidotes to counteract the effect of the drug, and in a few hours he was certainly better. Time would bring him out all right.

Success had crowned the efforts of the rescuers.

Delmont was in a state of the most intense delight. He had gained the greatest ease of his career.

This would make his everlasting fame, to say nothing of the fortune of one hundred thousand dollars, which was the reward.

"Will not Mrs. Darrell be delighted," he cried. "Surely, this is a big strike. I owe it all to you, Frank!"

"Pshaw!" said the young inventor, modestly, "don't say that. I am glad to have given you assistance."

"But without you I could never have done it!"

"I am not sure!"

"I am, though. I tell you these fellows had a terrible laid. It was nigh a success!"

"But it failed!"

"For which we should be glad!"

As for Mantillo, the honest fellow was in a seventh heaven of bliss and delight.

There was ample reason for this.

He was going back to his own kindred safe and sound and with a fortune. His future was bright.

He fairly prostrated himself at Frank's feet.

"Ah, noble senor," he cried. "I owe it all to you. You are my friend."

Barney and Pomp were in the highest of spirits. But Delmont wondered.

"What will De Mar do?" he asked. "Surely he will not care to show his head in America again."

"It may be," said Frank. "But he is a daring fellow. We may hear of him some time again."

"If he appears in my path I will kill him like a snake!"

"In that way only can he be got rid of. I shall not be surprised if we hear of him yet before we get out of the Gran Chaco."

"I don't see how he can do us any harm."

"Nor I. But he is a rascal of great resource. Don't forget that."

All that day the machine kept on to the southward. Progress was slow owing to the cause of various pampas fires, which compelled long detours.

At times Delmont looked back over the plain, and often or twice fancied he saw a body of horsemen in pursuit. But he could not verify this.

"In any event," he reflected, "they cannot cope with us. Once we reach Buenos Ayres we can give them an easy slip."

But the next day a tempest swept the plains, and they could only seek refuge in a grove of beeches and wait for it to pass.

Some progress was made that night with the aid of the search-light. But the next day, they came to the shores of the lake.

Here progress was slow, and they paused to take another look at the island palace and the labyrinth.

Then for three days they kept steadily southward, until once more the waters of the Rio Plata came to view.

At sight of them, and the knowledge that he was nearing home, Mantillo fell upon his knees in prayer.

Along the bank of the river the machine ran. Soon they came to the lowlands and swamps, at the spot where they had landed from the river steamer which had brought them from Buenos Ayres.

As it was easier to descend the river in this way, it was decided to wait a few days at this point in the hope of sighting some passing craft which would take them aboard.

Thus matters were when after two days had passed a small river steamer dropped down the current.

It was hailed.

The captain was only too glad to take the cargo and passengers. The little craft was moored by the bank.

Then the Flash was taken apart and put in sections aboard the steamer. The passengers went aboard and the trip down river was begun.

The captain was a jolly little fellow named Antonio Lopez.

He had just paid a visit to a plantation on the upper river and had left supplies and West India goods there.

On the way down the river he had taken two other passengers aboard. These latter had bunks in the forward part of the boat.

They were dressed as herders and wore remarkably thick beards. They did not engross the attention of our party to any extent.

Nor was an acquaintance sought by either. Though once Barney looked sharply at them, and said:

"Shure as I'm an Irishman wan av them min makes me think av that demon, De Mar. Only for the whiskers."

Down the river for a day the boat drifted.

They were nearing a small town called Santa Anita. Here a short stop was to be made.

They arrived off the place at midnight. As the dock could not be safely made at that hour, Captain Lopez moored his craft in the center of the stream.

The passengers had all retired to rest save Delmont. He was not sleepy, and sat out on deck until a late hour.

He sat by the rail smoking a cigar. Suddenly he heard something which sounded like the swish of a cable in the water.

He leaned over the rail and strained his gaze across the black current. Then a startling thing occurred.

From directly under the bow of the steamer there shot out a light boat. It had two occupants, and they were rowing swiftly.

Instinctively the detective cried:

"Hi there! Who is it?"

No answer came back. The boat vanished in the darkness.

"That is queer," muttered the detective. "Perhaps they are river thieves."

It was his impulse to call Captain Lopez. He stepped to the cabin door.

As he did so he saw a flash of light traversing the floor. Instantly he comprehended the truth.

It was gunpowder, and was connected with a time fuse. A terrible wild cry pealed from his lips.

"For your lives, everybody! Leap overboard!"

The cry brought every sleeper to his feet. All rushed out on deck. They were too soon.

The next moment there was an explosion. That it was not what the projectors had expected was afterward proved.

The forward part of the deck was shattered, and water poured into the boat. She instantly began to sink.

The native crew were kept in hand nobly by Captain Lopez.

Under his orders a boat was quickly run out. Some leaped into it, while others leaped overboard, preferring to trust themselves to the river current.

Fire blazed up instantly, and the interior of the steamer became a mass of flames.

Soon, however, she went down, the fire being quenched by the water.

From the shore our adventurers regarded it all with sad discomfiture. The Flash had doubtless been consumed or at least ruined by the flames, and was now in the bottom of the Rio Plata River.

It was a crushing denouement.

For a time little was said.

Fortunately for Mantillo he had clung to his bag of money, and his fortune was saved.

Delmont wrung Frank's hand.

"I regret this more than you can know," he said. "But you shall be made whole for it."

"By no means!" declared Frank. "It is entirely my loss."

"Who could have done such a dastardly deed? Ah, now I think of it, those two bearded passengers—"

Delmont paused and exchanged startled glances with Frank.

"Do you believe it?" exclaimed the detective. "Could they be identical with those villains Sagasta and De Mar?"

"There is the solution," said Frank, confidently. "You may be sure of it. They sought to even matters up by wiping us all out at one stroke."

"And by Jove, they nearly succeeded."

"That is true."

"I think we had better start an alarm and pursue them."

Captain Lopez, however, had already dispatched his men in all directions. Guards from the town joined.

All that night and the next day the quest was kept up.

But not a sign of the villains was found. They had made good their escape.

Certainly they had partly succeeded in gaining a mean revenge. The Flash and its fine effects were gone forever.

Of course it was quite a loss; yet there was nothing to do but make the best of it.

For several days the party hung about the settlement. Then Captain Lopez procured a flat boat, and took them further down the river.

Here they procured another steamer, and in due time were landed safely at Buenos Ayres.

As soon as possible, passage was procured for the United States.

Mantillo returned to his mother and his sweetheart. It is to be presumed that all his aspirations were gained.

In due time the party reached New York. Long before landing, Darrell, the missing man, had become himself again.

To say that he was grateful to his rescuers would be putting it mildly. He insisted upon making Frank Reade, Jr., and Barney and Pomp some fine presents.

The report of his rescue spread all over the country.

Delmont became the envied of all American detectives. He had made his fame and fortune at a stroke.

"But I owe it all to Frank Reade, Jr.," he declared.

Restored to his family and friends Millionaire Darrell was a happy man. All had turned out well.

Nothing was ever heard of De Mar or Sagasta again. Nor was any further interest taken in their careers.

Dan Delmont turned his attention to another case, and Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp returned to Readestown.

Here the young inventor began work upon a new invention. We will leave it to some future story to divulge what this was.



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